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ABSTRACT

This study examined the response latencies of 19 reticent kindergarten children, 19 peer controls, and their teachers during three "show and tell" sessions. Findings indicated that both groups of children took longer to respond to product questions than to choice questions or comments. Similarly, teachers waited longer for responses to product questions and waited equally long for both groups. However, after verbal children spoke, teachers waited longer before making a follow-up remark. Findings are discussed in terms of response complexity, teacher expectancy, support and control, and communication development. (Author/RH)

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CONVERSATIONAL RESPONSE LATENCIES OF TEACHERS AND RETICENT CHILDREN

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Abstract

About 10% of children talk minimally and volunteer little speech in classroom interaction. This project examined non-vocal aspects of their interaction--the response latencies of 19 reticent children, 19 peer controls and their teachers during "Show & Tell". Both groups of children took longer to respond to product questions than to choice questions or comments. Similarly teachers waited longer for responses to product questions and equally long for both groups. However after verbal children spoke, teachers waited longer before making a follow-up remark. The results are discussed in terms of response complexity, teacher expectancy, support and control, and communication development.

Introduction

Turntaking is a highly salient feature of conversation. While it normally occurs effortlessly, individuals characterized as "reticent" or "shy" less frequently take speaking turns and talk minimally when they do so (Evans, 1987; Buss, 1984). The switching pauses between speaker turns are thought to reflect social norms of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1978), conversational control (Buzolich & Wiemann, 1988) and processing time (Goldman-Eisler, 1968), and may include verbal fillers which serve to hold the floor and afford additional processing time for the speaker. In conversations in which one participant is primarily in control, in this case teacher-child, switching pauses may be construed in two ways: a) think-time between the teacher's remark and the child's response to it and b) wait-time between the child's response and the teacher's verbal reaction. Should children fail to respond to the teacher's first attempt to solicit participation, the interval between that and her second attempt may be called prompt-time. Given the suggestion that anxiety (Daly & Stafford, 1984) and less well developed language skills (Evans, 1967; Landon & Sommers, 1970; Phillips, 1984) contribute to reticence, this study examined switching pauses between teachers and reticent children versus control children. The expectation was that think-time would be longer for reticent children, and that teachers, recognizing the children's difficulty, would engage in longer wait-times and prompt-times with them.

Method

Three teachers and their six kindergarten classes participated. Nineteen children nominated by their teachers as shy and ranked at the bottom of class lists of verbal participation were selected and matched by sex to control children who appeared in the top 40% of the ranked lists. Three Show & Tell sessions were audiotaped to collect at least two samples for each child. Transcripts were made and teacher utterances were coded as choice questions, product/open questions, and contributions/phatics, and all child verbal fillers were identified. Because there was considerable background noise, pause durations were calculated with a manual digital stopwatch while simultaneously listening to the tapes and reading the transcripts. Three measurements were taken of each pause which were then averaged. Correlation with single measurements of a second

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Results

MANOVA and post-hoc comparisons revealed the following (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

1. Think-time for product/open questions > choice questions = contributions/phatics.
2. Prompt-time after product/open questions > contributions or phatics.
3. Teacher prompt-time for reticent children = control.
4. Verbal fillers among reticent children < control children.
6. Speaking turns starting with filler among reticent children < controls.
5. Mean utterance length for reticent children < control children.
6. Utterances per speaking turn for reticent children < control children.
7. Think-time for reticent = control children.
8. Teacher wait-time following reticent children's remark < control children's remark.

Discussion

Reticent children made less use of verbal fillers. Regardless of whether think-time was calculated to the verbal filler or to the start of the utterance proper, reticent and control children did not differ in think-time and both groups took longer to respond to product/open questions than to choice questions and contributions/phatics which did not differ. Thus reticent children appear to have similar sensitivities to the temporal aspects of turntaking and display as was expected, they longer think-times in formulating responses to more complex questions. Although think-time was not different for reticent children than control children, it was also the case that the speaking turns of reticent children were briefer and less complex despite similar task demands. From an information-processing perspective, their think-times, if anything, should have should have been shorter. In addition since they didn't formulate as many ideas into words they had less need for verbal fillers to hold the floor.

Teachers are sensitive to the additional processing demands for formulating responses to product/process question by displaying longer prompt-times after first making product/open questions than contributions/phatics, and they waited equally long before a second prompt to each group. However, teachers took back the speaking turn more quickly from reticent children by waiting less long after the child had finished speaking before making a response. This may have stemmed from enthusiasm over the reticent child's participation, or from expectancy for no further speech. Regardless these shorter wait-times gave reticent children less opportunity to extend their speaking turns and may further constrict their verbal participation. For example, Rowe (1973) has shown that simply increasing teacher wait-time during science lessons increased the length of student responses. Coupled with the high rate of teacher questioning observed with reticent children (Evans, 1987) these children in effect have fewer degrees of freedom in teacher-child conversations.

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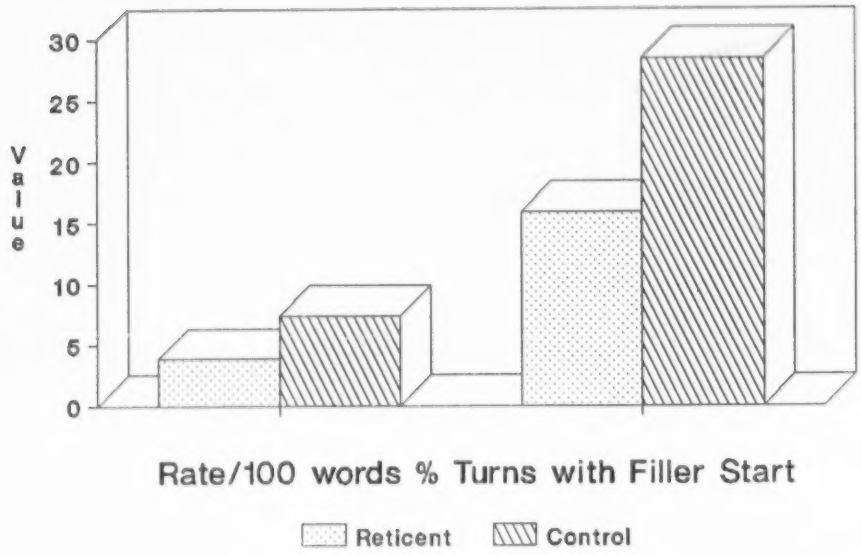
Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Teachers and Children by Group

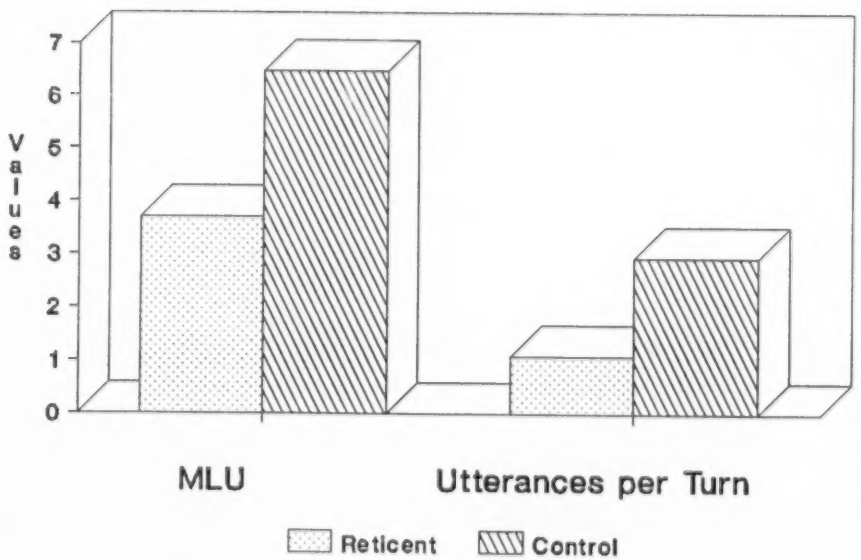
	Reticent M	Reticent SD	Verbal M	Verbal SD	Significant Effect
Mean Length of Utterance	3.71	(.58)	6.47	(1.09)	group effect
Utterances per Speaking Turn	1.09	(.27)	2.93	(.88)	group effect
Verbal fillers per 100 words	3.79	(2.22)	7.36	(3.68)	group effect
% speaking turns beginning with filler	15.92	(6.16)	28.46	(8.96)	group effect
Think-time to take floor following					
product question	1.46	(.44)	1.25	(.47)	
choice question	1.11	(.30)	1.05	(.41)	utterance effect
comments / phatics	.97	(.43)	1.05	(.46)	
Think-time to utterance proper following:					
product question	2.40	(.64)	2.23	(.58)	
choice question	1.36	(.60)	1.21	(.62)	utterance effect
comments / phatics	1.31	(.56)	1.18	(.53)	
Teacher prompt-time[1] following:					
product question	1.73	(.31)	1.70	(.43)	utterance effect
comments/phatics	1.16	(.81)	1.09	(.42)	
Teacher wait-time	.89	(.19)	1.26	(.25)	group effect

Note 1: prompt-time following choice questions were not examined, as non-verbal responses could not be detected.

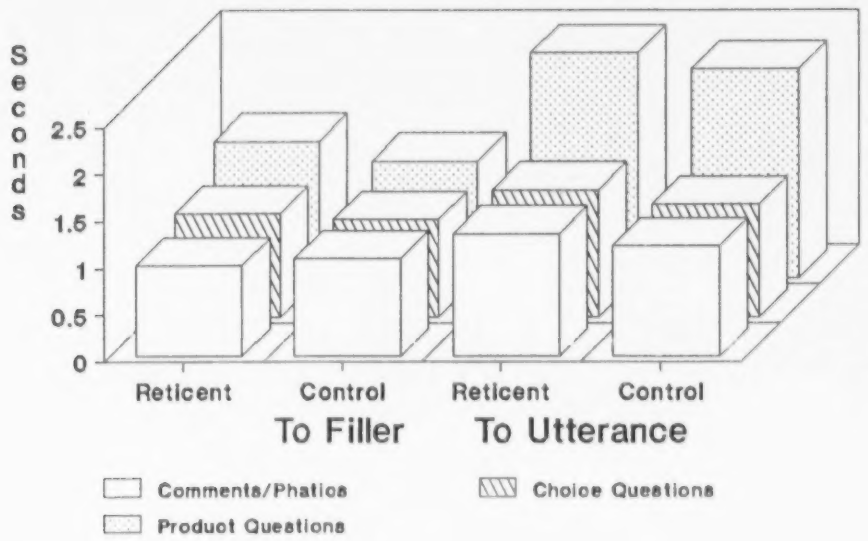
Use of Fillers by Group



Speech Output by Group



Think-Times by Group and Utterance Type



Teacher Wait-Time and Prompt-Time (P-T)